

## Panel II: Chimeras and Contamination



### Fungi as Destructive and Transformative in *Rosewater* by Tade Thompson and *The Beauty* by Aliya Whiteley

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In this paper I am going to explore ideas around fungi and semi-permeable bodies through the texts *Rosewater* by Tade Thompson (2016) and *The Beauty* by Aliya Whiteley (2014). To do so I'm first going to outline some theoretical/conceptual ideas that discuss bodies and matter, and how fungi, with their symbiotic and parasitic interactions with bodies, disrupt the idea of the body as discrete and inviolable. Then I'm going to explore these elements through the texts. Then I'll conclude, drawing together ideas across these two texts.

In Donna Haraway's "The Cyborg Manifesto," Haraway uses the cyborg as a metaphor to disrupt the humanist notion of the historically white male body as distinct from nature, woman, animal, and machine. She argues, "by the late twentieth century, our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism—in short, cyborgs."<sup>(7)</sup> I am interested in how this notion of hybridity between machine and organism extends to the biomolecular machinery of the microbiota and the symbionts and parasites that we live intimately with. The notion of the human body as a discrete, inviable self is not compatible with our knowledge of ourselves as interactions of cellular machinery and genetic coding from varied sources both prokaryotic and eukaryotic. Haraway talks about biology as "a kind of cryptography" and further explores the idea of humans as interacting biological systems with no clearly defined boundaries in *Staying with the Trouble*:

We are all lichens; so we can be scraped off the rocks by the Furies, who still erupt to avenge crimes against the earth. Alternatively, we can join in the metabolic transformations between and among rocks and critters for living and dying well. (56)

Using Haraway's question from "The Cyborg Manifesto," "Why should our bodies end at the skin, or include at best other beings encapsulated by skin?" as a jumping off point, Margrit Shildrick positions hybridity in relation to the disabled body and prostheses. Shildrick argues that prostheses, whether they be replacement limbs, behaviour altering drugs or transplanted organs, disrupt ideas about the body as a discrete entity and force us to rethink our ideas about embodiment:

They not only demonstrate the inherent plasticity of the body, but, in the very process of incorporating non-self matter, point to the multiple possibilities of co-corporeality, where bodies are not just contiguous and mutually reliant but entwined with one another. (16)

Thus, considering bodies as “contiguous, mutually reliant and entwined” disrupts hierarchies of viewing non-disabled bodies as superior to disabled bodies, and allow us to rethink what constitutes a body and what its limits are. How we view embodiment also influences our ideas around subjectivity. Annemarie Mol uses the idea of eating an apple to explore ideas around embodiment and subjectivity. Through the act of eating, the subject’s role morphs from a traditional Western active subjectivity to a more complex one, as the apple is broken down and digested across the membranes of the digestive system, an action both passive yet regulated. Mol argues, “her actorship is distributed and her boundaries are neither firm nor fixed... Neither tightly closed off, nor completely open, an eater has semi-permeable boundaries” (30).

I would like to explore how two speculative fiction texts, *Rosewater* by Tade Thompson and *The Beauty* by Aliya Whiteley, use fungi as destructive and transformative agents that challenge the humanist idea of the body as discrete and inviolable, and offer ways of rethinking the body as a complex adaptive system interacting with and within other systems. In this way the texts allow us to challenge preconceived ideas about embodiment and subjectivity.

Tade Thompson’s *Rosewater* is set in a near future Nigeria in which an alien incursion has occurred, in the form of Wormwood, which has burrowed under the ground and released fungi-like spores into Earth’s atmosphere. Wormwood is trapped under the dome of Utopicity, and the city of Rosewater has sprung up around it. The alien fungi, or xenofom, attaches itself to the natural fungi on human skin, forming a psychic network called the xenosphere which “sensitives” like protagonist Kaaro are able to access like the internet. In the virtual space of the xenosphere, sensitives are able to embody themselves in nonhuman forms—Kaaro appears as a Griffin, and inhabits such surreal places as a palace made of meat. But the xenosphere is more than just a recapitulation of the cyberpunk dream. In *Rosewater*, everyone is connected into a communal “worldmind,” the differences between discrete individual bodies called into question as consciousness extends across fungal networks and through different people’s minds.

The dome opens once a year, releasing alien fungi into the atmosphere and healing the injured and diseased. However, this process does not always work as the people who flock to visit Rosewater might wish. Whilst some are healed, others are put back together wrong—

the deformed, or mutated or remade in new and unusual ways—the remade. Even the dead are infected with xenofoms, brought back to life as soulless zombies—the reanimates. Thus, the interaction between humans and the alien fungi doesn't so much return people to an idealised complete body but remakes it in challenging new forms. This is further complicated by Kaaro's discovery that the xenofoms are slowly replacing human cells with more xenofoms whilst replicating the original body's appearance, and that eventually humanity will be entirely replaced. This causes Kaaro to question his own subjectivity:

I am not the same. I don't look at the dome in the same way. It's now a styne or a boil, swollen with purulence, waiting, biding its time. I don't know what my healing has cost me. How many native cells have the xenofoms driven out? Ten, fifteen percent? How human am I? I see the people touching me and the ones at the periphery staring as dead people. Conquered and killed by invaders, walking around carrying their death, but they don't even know it. (236)

The replacement of human cells by the alien xenofoms can be read as a metaphor for colonialism, especially as this all takes place in a Nigeria where the indigenous culture has been overwritten by the all-powerful cultural influences of the West. Thus the fungal entities in *Rosewater* force us to confront not just the way we think about human bodies but how we think about the body politic in the context of Western post-colonialism.

*The Beauty* by Aliya Whiteley is set after a plague has wiped out all women. The protagonist Nate lives in the Valley of Stones with a community of men who have survived the plague. In the forest where the dead women have been buried, he meets the Beauty, creatures who have grown from the mushrooms feeding on the bodies of the women, who provide the men of the community with love and sex. Eventually the men become pregnant with the offspring of the Beauty, allowing a continuation of sorts for humanity. Like Thompson's humans being slowly rewritten by xenofoms, the Beauty pose an ontological question. After two of the men murder their Beauties, the village doctor discovers that the Beauty have incorporated the bones of the women they grew from into their bodies. Nate sees the Beauty as the women returned to the community from beyond the dead; Uncle Tom and the other older men see them as a frightening and parasitic alien Other.

The Beauty disrupt the boundary between alive and dead and human and nonhuman, eliciting disgust from the older members of the community but also from Nate when he first encounters them. However they also disrupt the gender norms of the men they come in contact with. Whilst they appear in feminine shape to arouse male desire, sexual intercourse with the Beauty results in the male humans becoming pregnant with the Beauty's offspring. By putting the burden of pregnancy on the inviolable male body, and forcing it to undergo

changes in shape and appearance, Whiteley challenges ideas around gendered bodies, and the idea of bodies as unchangeable. Nate reflects on the changes his body will go through as it shifts away from sexual potency towards nurturing and caring:

The idea of this was worse when it was happening to someone else. Now it is me and it is inevitable, and nothing inevitable is ever that bad. If I have to live with it, then how can it be unbearable? Besides, bodies betray us. That is what they do. (89)

He comes to accept his body as mutable and permeable, whether through pregnancy or plague, it can be disrupted and altered. The pregnant body is another instance where the body becomes contiguous with another, in this case the foetus, as Nate realises on becoming pregnant: “We will meld to grow. Part human, part Beauty. Could anything be more wonderful, more terrifying?” (59). The survival of humanity is assured only by this melding between human and Beauty, as embodied by their children.

So, fungi in speculative fiction gives us a new way to think about the permeability of the body and the effects this has on embodiment and subjectivity. In Tade Thompson’s *Rosewater*, fungi connects humanity and its environment into a contiguous whole even as it rewrites the human body as its own. In Aliya Whiteley’s *The Beauty*, fungi disrupts preconceived notions around gendered bodies. Both books help us to rethink what the limits of the human body are.

### Works Cited

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